Legal eagle and playwright, Eleanor Wong, takes time off her busy schedule to chat with PARVATHI NAYAR

WHEN The Campaign To Confer The Public Servant Star On JBI opens next week at the inaugural Singapore Theatre Festival (STP), its playwright, lawyer/educator Eleanor Wong will find herself in the public spotlight. Again.

It’s a place she has occupied off and on for a very long time, beginning with her wins in the high-profile TV debates as a National University of Singapore (NUS) student, on provocative topics such as “disent for its own sake has become fashionable in Singapore”; or winning the first NUS playwriting competition with Peter’s Passionate Pursuit, which took digs at a political party dressed in white, and was picked up for staging by professional theatre company Stars; or winning the prestigious Philip C. Jessup law mock.

A state of affairs that continued when she became deputy public prosecutor or current affairs talk show host. “By luck and accident she admits,” “events kept me in the public eye. Which meant that the opinions I expressed through my plays would be picked up and be heard. None of my plays have been without socio-political commentary.”

But it was Invitation To Treat, the trilogy of Wong’s plays staged by Wild Rice in 2003, that marked her return to the theatre after a gap of some seven years. This time she is here to stay. “Treat reminded me how wondrous it is to be part of the theatre community, and the larger Singapore community. We staged ‘Treat’ during Sars, and I was so struck by the bravery of people coming out to see it, to hear them say we couldn’t go on in isolation forever, we needed to come together, to the arts, support and hug each other.”

Since then, as part of Wild Rice’s informal advisory team, she has helped Joan Heng develop the ongoing STF since the idea was first mooted two years ago. “From the very beginning, I felt it needed to be inclusive, and be a ‘Singapore’ not ‘Wild Rice’ festival, with Wild Rice taking on the marketing and the financial risk.”

On her discussions with Heng about the programming: “You have to have pieces that bring in the money that you set aside as a war chest, which permits you to do the work that matters. It is unrealistic to think a single work must straddle both artistic and commercial camps.”

Passionate pursuits: Eleanor currently juggles her professional obligations, such as educator, lawyer and chairman of the Council of the Advertising Standards Authority of Singapore, with her artistic interests.

Risky venture

This year, STF is the risky venture of huge artistic worth, a festival of practically all new local work. “We would love for it to make money, but won’t put that kind of pressure on it. If necessary we will eat the cost and make the money on our Christmas pantos.”

“STF has become a festival about things that matter; we see writers returning to issues of general concern to Singapore. There has been a lot of criticism lately that local plays only deal with gender politics, but that is not true for the plays in STF.”

Exploring Singaporean issues is a cause that finds expression in Wong’s role as an educator as well. As director of the legal skills programme at NUS, she says: “It is about giving students a hands-on experience, to equip them with the core skills of legal reasoning. Legal education for the longest time has been about content knowledge. However, there has been such an explosion in the variety of human interactions for which we need rules to guide behaviour that we cannot take that static approach any more. Lawyers need skills that allow them to bridge the gap between old and new knowledge. “Law is a funny mirror of how we use the sanction of the state to reward or punish.”

Dues she feel any qualms about being as outspoken as she is? With character for example: “I think there should be more examples of being more courageous, being more truthful. ‘It would be foolish not to be nervous, as it is not often clear where the boundaries of acceptability are. But it is important to feel and acknowledge the nervousness, then act anyway, after searching your heart to make sure you aren’t being mischievous, but are saying something that deserves to be said’.”

“Often jokes — half seriously — that in Singapore it is safer to be uniformly and consistently outspoken; otherwise you might be accused of having some hidden agenda. My views aren’t really very different; I don’t think I’m talking to the press or to a friend. I am someone who believes in the need to expand the space for public expression, and hope I’m doing my part to grab that space and keep it open.”

Political satire

Which brings us to her latest project, the political satire titled with the three provocative initials.

She chuckles. “Those expecting the play to be a direct political treatment of the life and times of JBI, you might be disappointed. The titular campaign of the play is a stepping off point to discuss other issues of the time. The play is a fictitious tale about an umpire hero who challenges the boundaries of public debate and discussion have shifted in to Singapore.”

Whether people ask the inevitable question — “Is the play’s JBI a reference to the opposition politician J R Jayakaran?” — “I am happy to say that I don’t assume it is, and it is those three initials leaving you to remember? Well, these questions are examined in the play itself. After all, we should be able to talk about the contribution made by the real JBI without having to agree with everything he stands for, or being cynical about the government.”

As an artist, I didn’t need his permission, but I thought it was good manners to let him know that this play was coming up, and part of the reason it might generate a storm is because I used his initials.”

Wong believes that JBI is part of a trilogy she will write on Singapore politics. Currently, her days are full with thinking about — and writing — those two other plays, putting together an anthology of her earlier works, teaching, fulfilling obligations in roles such as chairman of the Council of the Advertising Standards Authority of Singapore. As she proposes a — figurative — toast to the future through her multiple engagements with Singapore community, it seems a pretty redundant question to ask whether the glass she raises is half empty or half full.

The Campaign To Confer The Public Servant Star On JBI, Aug 9-12, Drama Centre Theatre, 3pm and 8pm, tickets $23 to $48 from Stivid (6346 5555, www.stivid.com.sg).